

Humans are not rational, PERIOD!

This article talks about how you are influenced by prejudice and therefore in no way can realize your true mental potential.

This has severe consequences on your creativity as well as on your company's earnings and growth.

You would think that people, especially well-educated and enlightened ones, are rational and know how to make good decisions. But no! Prejudice is human's help to avoid ambiguity and making tough decisions.

No matter what you think, you have prejudices. Yes, you too suffer from prejudices. A prejudice is a very often negative preconceived opinion, which is typically formed on insufficient or incorrect assumptions and which is hard to change. It is a judgment made prior to having certain knowledge on a particular issue.

Behavioral research

In the 21st century, large sums will be invested in research on understanding human behavior. First, we want to discover how we can sell more to our customers, but we also want to understand how we at the national and the international levels can change people's (inappropriate) behavior. Prejudice is one of the most significant inappropriate human achievements.

It is as if our prejudices are tattooed on us. Getting rid of our prejudices is one of the hardest things to do. We condemn and judge people and their decisions in a matter of seconds with extreme consequences for our surroundings and ourselves.

We people have a clear picture of what the right solution is, who is the most competent person to handle a specific task, and what the right result of a task should look like—and this happens even before we have a look at the alternative solutions.

The reason behavioral research will be a big thing is that we (companies, employees, and colleagues) simply need to understand why we do, what we do or do not do, and what we should be doing. We need to know why and how we make people quit smoking, make them stop having unprotected sex, start to eat healthier food, stop excluding other people, etc.

Illogical decisions

Consequently, people make illogical and unhealthy decisions, and this also applies to management in companies, politicians, as well as consumers buying wrong products in grocery stores. Everybody makes decisions every day; however, many of us dislike uncertainty and therefore trust the most readily available information. We often wear blinkers when we are in the process of making a decision. And when we are provided with additional information that is contradictory to the information we currently know, there is a big chance that we will just ignore the contradictory new information. This is also the reason most of us tend to just accept information from authorities and social norms.

Prejudice takes over

All of us are subject to group pressure, personal flaws, and prejudices, which cause us not to make the best decisions. We are doomed to fail, and additionally, we suffer from other people's prejudices against us. It affects our opportunities in life, and there is very little we can do about it.

In Denmark, many of us believe that workmen from Jutland are trustworthy, whereas workmen from, for example, Poland are not. If everybody knew everyone in Denmark, everybody would know that there are trustworthy and not-so-trustworthy workmen in Jutland. The same goes for workmen from other parts of Denmark. When you are an only child, many people assume that you are spoiled. Again, we should just say that some only children are spoiled and some are not. However, because it is impossible for

everybody to know everybody, we form our opinions about other people and situations based on a combination of our experiences and the things we hear. The question is whether we have the breadth of view necessary to see beyond our flaws and prejudices and whether there is anything we can do to ensure that we achieve our personal and corporate goals.

Our untrained eyes

In January, I attended lectures conducted by the renowned researcher Mahzarin Banaji (professor at Harvard Kennedy University, Boston). Among other things, she showed me a lot of group photos of employees working in dental clinics all over the world. Surprisingly, the photos had something in common: the male dentist was the boss, and all the women were assistants. That is the way it is in most dental clinics all over the world!

In one of the photos, a man was standing among women. All of us 65 students mistakenly assumed that he was the boss. In this photo, a woman (standing right in the middle) was the boss. We did not see it as a result of the force of habit. None of us noticed her because we were so untrained in looking for a female boss that we did not even consider that there could be a female boss in the photo. And she was standing right in the middle of the picture. The lesson is that when we get used to a certain pattern, we stop thinking that things can be different. We stop looking for other patterns.

I have a good friend who owns and manages some of Africa's most successful private airlines. She is a woman—a black woman. Most likely she is the only black woman in the industry. She has many good stories about how people treat her until they find out who she is. She meets some of the world's richest movie stars, royals, and politicians when they are passengers on her private airplane. When they land and more than two to three people exit the plane, where one is a woman, one is colored, and one is a white man, her employees readily assume that the white man is the boss, the woman his wife, and the colored an assistant. Quite stereotyped.

Quite often, our perception of the stereotype is quite wrong. However, it lies latent in most of us. We hold specific beliefs about who is what—in this case, who is the boss, the wife, and so on.

Another example is when the famous television host Oprah Winfrey was traveling in South Africa. She was traveling with her many white assistants. People thought that some of her assistants, and not her, were the big stars. She was given less regard until people found out who she was.

Recently while visiting Switzerland, she wanted to see a bag with a price tag of about \$35,000. The shop assistant said, "I think this bag is too expensive for you." This is yet another prejudice: it is impossible that a black woman can afford such an expensive bag. This incident had serious consequences for the shop when the media demanded for an explanation on the matter.

Prejudice creates community

It happens every day all over the world. We misinterpret and rank people according to status, race, nationality, and gender. Generally speaking, your prejudices take over every time you prefer to believe something instead of examining the situation and gathering credible information.

These errors of judgment cost businesses gigantic sums every day. You cannot just solve a problem by telling your employees, "Please treat all customers the same," because it is a fact that people cannot do

that. There are people we do not like, and therefore, we treat them worse than we do others. We rank people in terms of “them and us.”

Prejudice is frequently seen as a component of a group’s effort to create inner cohesiveness. The group strengthens their feeling of togetherness by taunting and despising people whom they have prejudices against—that is, if we take prejudices seriously, and we are not just talking about a (typically) bad sense of humor.

Who receives poor service?

Over the past several years, I have been an observer and adviser of the call centers of many big companies. When customers call and stutter or speak poor Danish, they usually get poorer service than a normal native Dane would.

The gist is that people are biased, also toward you. This is true irrespective of where you live and whether you are a teacher or an engineer, a Frenchman or a Dane.

There are groups of people who have prejudices against you even though they have not met anyone like you.

Assumptions and wrong images

Researchers say that we live in a time where we need to be able to visualize innovations. We live in a time where we make our living from the production of intangible products. However, we have a weak imagination. We cannot imagine or visualize things we have not seen before. It is almost impossible. Why? Because we are not trained for it.

Recently, a large group of nine-year-olds was asked what a scientist looks like. They were asked to draw a picture of a scientist. They each made one drawing. Although they could not see each other’s drawing, the result was the same. They all drew a white male wearing glasses and a white coat, standing inside a laboratory.

Then a group of scientists was brought into the room to meet the children: women and men. Afterward, the children were once again asked to draw what a scientist looks like. Now, the drawings were completely different. They were more colorful and lively and included women. The meeting with the scientists completely changed the children’s perception of what a scientist looks like. Now, a scientist could be a woman wearing a dress.

Gender perceptions

We talk a lot about quotas. Is that a good thing or a bad idea? Can quotas on women in boardrooms or quotas on men studying to become a nurse or a midwife change anything about our perception of what men and women could become? We are quite inflexible in our opinions on who should hold which jobs. However, we do not say it out loud. When asked whom we want as our boss, most of us prefer a man.

This is a bit peculiar: When you ask Danes who they believe is best at managing a company—a woman or a man—a small majority answer, “The female managers.” However, when you ask them which gender they prefer for a boss, most of them prefer a male boss.

This was the result of a study conducted by the recruitment company Ranstad in 32 countries, with the participation of at least 400 employees aged between 18 and 65 from each country. Many people simply cannot imagine having a female boss. Gender is important to many people. You would not expect that to be the case in Denmark in 2013.

A study shows that 28 percent of Danes believe that women are the best managers, whereas 25 percent believe that men are. However, if they could choose the gender of their boss, 37 percent would choose a male boss, while 27 percent would choose a female boss.

This is the case not just in Denmark. Recently, a major study was carried out in England, where 2,000 women were asked the same question. A total of 63 percent of women in England answered that they prefer a male boss.¹

The primary reason, according to the women participants in the study, is that male bosses have fewer “mood swings” and that they do not bring their personal problems to work. Other reasons are that men supposedly have more authority, talk more directly, and are better at making decisions.

That women are in fact good managers is ignored, and a study shows that they are indeed better managers than men (a study among 5,600 Danish employees who were asked about their experiences with their immediate superior).²

This conclusion applies to both the private and the public sectors; also, male employees answer that women are better bosses than men.

It is therefore a good idea to have more women in managerial positions in Denmark, where less than one-third of employees have a female boss. The study’s findings are supported by other sources—and they are statistically significant—so women are better managers than men.³

It goes without saying that we select the most competent person for a job, right? Nonsense. There are thousands of examples of people choosing what they are familiar with and what they like rather than choosing the most competent person. It happens every day, all year round, not just based on gender, but also based on race, age, etc. We do not choose the best people for the job; rather, we choose the ones whom we like and find similar to us. Yes, legislation and political intervention are sometimes necessary. Take for an example Rwanda five years after a legislation about having more women in their parliament was passed. Now, more than 50 percent of the members of parliament are women. However, most people do not want to open doors for someone who is not from their own tribe, race, gender, etc. It is sometimes necessary to push a little to move us in the right direction.⁴

Whom we hire

An interesting example is an American symphony orchestra: they also had to realize that they have been suffering from a conservative and outdated way of thinking about recruitment. Experiments revealed that they would get the best musicians if they recruited by listening to their music without being able to see the musicians. The result was that they went from having mostly male musicians to having an almost 50/50 gender split. When you need to choose people for a job, you should think more about what you truly need to know about the applicants, and in particular, you should think about what you do not need to know. The more you know, the more mistakes you might end up making, because the more you know, the more you risk losing focus on what is important.

Article by Soulaima Gourani

We are indirectly affected

When the well-known Danish TV show *Borgen* was shown a few years ago, I was asked by a radio reporter if the political TV drama could influence Helle Thorning's ability to win the election. My response was that it definitely could influence the election. The TV show portrays a female prime minister, and while it was showing, Danes had the opportunity to get accustomed to the idea of having a female prime minister. And yes, she did win that election. The point is that by no means are you as tolerant, flexible, and large-minded as you think you are. Confront your prejudices and become more innovative, get new inspiration, and gain more influence.

Do you want to explore your prejudices? Believe me, you are also extremely prejudiced.

Take this test: www.implicit.harvard.edu.